

## **Must the MNLA Disarm For Elections in Mali to Succeed? Reflections from Turkey and the UK.**

By Christos Kyrrou, Ph.D.



*"The military leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Murat Karayilan, has said fighters will begin to withdraw from Turkey in early May."* from the BBC News 25 April 2013.

**Mali is heading towards one of the most critical general elections in its entire history.** Theoretically and for all practical purposes the country is still at war against the separatist Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in the North and domestic Islamist militant groups such as Ansar Dine and international terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). A French intervention repelled the Islamic militants but in collaboration with the MNLA which put the war between the Malian government and the MNLA on hold. As a step towards normalization the government of national unity put in place after a military coup has declared general elections in July 2013 (Presidential) and September 2013 (Parliamentary). So far the government has challenges the MNLA to disarm as a condition for their participation to the oncoming elections. The MNLA has refused declaring the measure as unnecessary putting the plans for a peaceful elections in Mali in question. So one wonders... is there space for a compromise between these seemingly opposing views? Recent history and even current affairs elsewhere may provide some space for optimism.

Against the abysmal differences between the conflict in the UK and Turkey with that in Mali there may be some useful ideas to explore regarding to guerrilla disarmament in a peace process, from the cases of the PKK and from Northern Ireland.

Without approval from the Turkish authorities the PKK has placed the following sequence of ending it's 20 years war with Turkey:

1. Gradual withdrawal of PKK forces from Turkish soil
2. Constitutional amendments made by Turkish government
3. PKK completely lays down arms once Ocalan and other Kurdish militants released from prison

(From the BBC News 25 April 2013)

The PKK is following a very consistent pattern with other insurgent groups about to dismantle in recent history, placing dismantlement in the end, instead of the beginning of the peace process. This is the process that the IRA followed in Northern Ireland, the Maoist rebels in Nepal, the ANC in South Africa and others. And yet in the case of Mali disarmament might become a serious problem in dealing with the MNLA, which currently occupies Kidal and other territories close to the borders with Mauritania, Algeria and Niger.

Among other things peculiar to Mali, such as its ethnic and tribal complexity, history, politics and so on, there are several structural variables for comparison which make a timely MNLA disarmament even less likely:

To begin with, **a standard condition for an insurgent group to be willing to disarm is that itself, as well as the government they fight, have come to the separate but mutual realization that none can win.** The Malian army is gradually recovering from its wounds from fighting the MNLA and seem overconfident in their newly trained and equipped army. On the other side, it is an issue of great concern the degree to which the French, while strategically collaborating with the MNLA in order to repel Al Qaida and other Islamist militant groups from Mali, may have unintentionally empowered the MNLA *not* to disarm. The two parties today seem further from the mutual recognition that they can not win than they did before the French intervention.

Another component **missing is a broader regional framework directly influencing change in Mali itself.** The Kurds in Turkey have achieved several steps in regards to Human Rights in Turkey from within the EU framework, and the war or even the cause for independence is growing irrelevant. Similarly to Northern Ireland where the British began granting rights to the Catholics as the Good Friday Agreement was kicking in within the framework of the UK devolution process. The use of weapons by the IRA became not only unnecessary but counterproductive. In the case of Mali the influence of the African Union and the Economic

Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as the EU and the international community, may have gone as far as to force the military regime form a government of national unity but it still doesn't provide a policy maker or breaker at the constitutional and/or legislative level. Such influence does not exist on Mali so as to push towards resolving issues of fair recourse distribution and economic development, and other factors that persist especially in the north as causes for civic and ethnic incipience and chronic rebellions.

Another factor that is **missing from Mali is a critically strong set of invested interests on security by states which are influenced by constituencies directly connected to the parties in conflict.**

Throughout the last decade there has been a surge in negotiations and the production of agreements between Turkey and the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq). Turkey and the KRG have built too strong a web of regional financial interdependencies to let it all blow in the air due to the PKK question. Sacrifices for the sake of stability grew more likely from both sides. In Northern Ireland the "troubles" had evolved politically and financially into a disaster for both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. They were forced to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement and then followed closely with the Good Friday Agreement and St Andrew Agreement to make sure progress was guaranteed.

Finally, **the presence of Al Qaida** in Mali is not so much a factor in Turkey's conflict with the PKK in comparison to Mali, with the exception of Syria's Kurdish area - and that's still questionable as the Syrian Kurds have established strong enclaves of control. In Northern Ireland it was not a factor at all.

Given these variables alone the likelihood of a resolution of the conflict with the MNLA, if reignited will turn either as it did in Spain and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) now chronic - even after ETA's unilateral siege fire and disarmament - or with the north separating as Kosovo did after the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) won its way against the Republic of Yugoslavia back in 2008.

So given all these differences how can one hope for a better outcome in Mali?

**The MNLA is not in a position to protect and rule an independent state.** On one hand the MNLA is still very vulnerable, not only to the Malian army but also to their former allies, the various local and foreign Islamist militant groups and Al Qaida. There is also a high degree of fatigue from the conflict among the majority of the people in the north who have suffered most from the war including half a million refugees and IDPs who have yet to return back home and who reside currently in

camps in neighboring countries, many under appalling conditions. It is unlikely that the MNLA has consolidated power to the degree that it can count on the support of the majority of the Tuareg even in the north. But even if they did, they are in no position to rule and protect the very state that they aspire to declare independent without massive external assistance including military, humanitarian aid, administrative and logistical support, and whatever else makes a state a state. Neglect from previous Malian governments before the war erupted require that the MNLA, given that all goes their way, will have to build a whole country anew while fighting forces such as Ansar Dine who had previously joined the Islamist Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) in almost decimating them in Gao. It is clear to the West and hopefully to the MNLA itself that a full independence from Mali is currently, to say the least, unrealistic. What remains to the MNLA if they wish to strategically preserve their aspirations for independence is to discover a political partner in Bamako in pursuing a common interest in establishing a more effective Malian state for the north and south alike.

**It might be a better idea for the MNLA to not demilitarize yet.** In Northern Ireland it'd been mutually, but never officially recognized that, given the weak policing regime in many Ulster counties during the troubles, the risk to Catholic communities would have been far too big if the IRA had disarmed prematurely. It would have been disastrous just leaving the Catholics unprotected and a potential prey to Protestant paramilitaries some of whom still have not given up their arms even to this day. So for the British to not insist in placing disarmament as a cold condition to the IRA it was not only a matter of accommodating flexibility as much as a very realistic approach in protecting the peace process from turning into an even worse disaster.

To translate this into Mali, considering the bad blood between the MNLA and their former allies - the various Islamist groups and Al Qaida - the risk to MNLA disarming may outweigh the risk of falling back into war against the government, even if the Malian army and security forces extended a friendly hand to the MNLA to disarm. If anything else, what becomes increasingly obvious is the need for the government of Mali and the MNLA to recognize the benefits of joining forces against these threats. Before the French intervention the two parties were closer to that point of convergence than they are today and it is interesting to know what diplomatic maneuvering the French have made, if any, to keep this realization fresh and alive. So far all contacts and deals between the French and the MNLA remain secret. One can only hope that they have managed to share the rigorous assessment that the MNLA is not ready alone to rule and protect an independent country even if they managed to get their way but that they may still need their weapons in order to protect the areas that they control against Islamic militants. The Malian

army just as the The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) may have to gradually demonstrate that they can fill in the vacuum in providing security in the north as effectively as the French/Chadian/MNLA collaboration did.

To conclude... **is it realistic to expect that the MNLA disarms before elections in order for them to participate?**

There is a strong pattern indicating that insurgents' laying down their weapons is *not* a necessary condition for a peace process to move forward. The British allowed Sinn Féin to run in elections without decommissioning (demilitarizing) for years. What they did place as a pre-requisite and got was the *promise* by the IRA to disarm once elections were proven fair and politics proven productive.

If the MNLA does not comply, as things are the Malian government will have to reignite a sweeping counterinsurgency campaign with freshly and untested trained groups with a wounded morale to fully recover the north hoping for peaceful elections as close as July. That risking a new MNLA collaboration with the Islamist militants and a new cycle of violence which will turn another half a million refugees and IDPs and destroy the country for good. It is not guaranteed that the UN peacekeeping force will be involved in taking sides and nations contributing troops might begin pulling out one after another before the state collapses altogether.

What if instead of demilitarizing immediately, the MNLA committed to the *promise* to disarm and joined the Malian civic society and the international community to secure fair elections in the areas that they control? As Utopian as that might sound it has worked elsewhere and it might work here too.

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## **Are we asking for too much from Mali?**

By Christos N Kyrou, Ph.D.

A woman carries a child at a refugee camp near the Malian border [AFP]

As the French and Chadian troops are withdrawing from Mali, from the surface, one can be optimistic. The French troops within a few months only, through Operation Serval, together with Malian, Chadian and other nations' troops, saved the south from Islamic extremists. Repelled them to the north, destroyed their hideouts there, and killed and captured them in great numbers. Now France and Chad claim their job is done and are withdrawing, leaving behind 1,000 French soldiers together with 6,300 UN sanctioned African Peacekeepers from Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Guinea. In the meantime the European Union has begun training 2,000 more Malian troops for patrolling duty. The operation is supported and sponsored by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union (EU) and other entities and it appears that logistically they are on top of the situation. In fact general elections are scheduled for as early as this coming July... What could possibly go wrong?

**First: Mali is a nation in fear, brought down to ruins.** The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that, at minimum, another 11,200 troops might be needed to stabilize Mali. In the United States the assistant secretary of defense for special operations Michael Sheehan told the Senate Armed Services subcommittee that the ECOWAS force "isn't capable at all."[\[1\]](#) But it doesn't take an expert. The people of Mali, especially in the north, are growingly nervous, if not desperate, as the French and Chadians withdraw.[\[2\]](#) Mali is left in ruins with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC) projecting for December 2013 up to 540,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) only 230,000 of whom can hope for assistance by UNHCR. The refugees are dispersed in camps in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania where[\[3\]](#) camp conditions are already appalling.[\[4\]](#)

**Second: The Islamic extremists have withdrawn beaten but are far from defeated.** French and Malian troops met some significant resistance in Ifoghas mountains, and in street-fights in Gao and other cities but the bulk of the insurgents seems to have vanished; appearing and disappearing from as far south as Diabaly and the Capitol.[\[5\]](#) There is a strong basis for concern that these extremists will return and/or reemerge given a more favorable environment.

**Third: A badly prepared or designed peacekeeping operation can make things even worse.** Complex peacekeeping operations deploying in areas with an ongoing conflict with tribal undertones have proven to be unpredictable and sometimes even counterproductive. In June 5<sup>th</sup> 1993 in Somalia, during an inspection of a Somali arms weapons storage site, allegedly by order of General Aidid, 24 Pakistani peacekeepers were

massacred. Six days later, in search of Aidid, UN helicopters attacked a house where many tribal leaders were deciding whether to support Aidid or to assist the UN instead (Aidid was not in the house). Many of the elders were killed, and that attack sealed the fate of UNOSOM II, leading to the full withdrawal of peacekeeping troops after the October 3-4 Battle of Mogadishu. Such a scenario is very likely here, as warlords such as Iyad Ag Ghaly have already played one tribe against the other and would probably try it against the UN troops as well.

Finally, for reasons explained later this is to become a long term peacekeeping operation. There is always a danger that illegal trade, human trafficking, rape, and crime may increase due to the presence of peacekeepers as we've seen for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Somalia. Mali, and the north in particular is already identified as a center for human trafficking. [\[6\]](#) The presence of a badly organized peacekeeping force may make things even worse.

**Fourth: The very reason that this war started, to begin with, has not been addressed yet.** Back in its prime the Kaddafi regime in Libya hired as mercenaries hundreds of youth from northern Mali, and the Tuareg tribe in particular, who had fled Mali due to economic hardship and political persecution. With the collapse of the regime and Kaddafi's death, many kept their weapons and moved back to Mali where they took on an old cause: the creation of an independent Tuareg led State in Northern Mali -there have been five Tuareg rebellions since 1916 with the last one from 2007 – 2009. They formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). As the MNLA advanced against Malian government troops, sooner than later, they found their movement hijacked by Ansar Dine, an Islamic extremist organization led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, and predominately of Tuareg.

Seeing an opportunity, the Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (roaming in North Africa with different names since the late 90's, and consisted mostly of Arab volunteers), entered and occupied Malian communities applying a strict form of Sharia Law and destroying some of the most ancient Islamic heritage of the country. The MNLA and Ansar Dine faced each other in a battle at Gao where the MNLA (or what was left of it) humiliated, abandoned the coalition and went in search for another purpose. They declared their ambition for an independent state "untimely," recognized the sovereignty of Mali, and turned against the Islamists. When the French troops intervened, the Islamic extremists were close to taking over the country. With Ansar Dine speedily defeated the French engaged directly with their main objective: to repel Al Qaida.

Fighting in a most challenging terrain which they nicknamed "Mars," the



Legion faced the dilemma of either engaging with the MNLA and Al Qaida simultaneously or to collaborate with the insurgents in blocking off the routes of escape of Al Qaida to the North into Algeria and Niger. To the dismay of the Malian government the French chose the second, leaving the MNLA question to be dealt with later, after the war against Al Qaeda was over. The experience of the war between many Malians and members of the MNLA has left deep scars, and even though not all Tuareg had joined the MNLA, many non-Tuareg Malians feel that they have experienced the war in clear-cut tribal lines<sup>[7]</sup>. This unfinished business is looming over Mali as the chances for a new war between the MNLA and the government of Mali are very much there.

**Fifth: Mali is ruled by a violent military regime holding up a civilian face by a thread.** While the MNLA was taking over the north, the government of Mali was brought down by a military coup of officers who disagreed with the way that President Amadou Toumani Touré handled the insurgency. He was forced out of office which immediately triggered a world condemnation against the junta and which placed the Malian government in the category of governments to which the United States, by law, are not to provide any form of help with the exception of purely humanitarian aid. Against several attempts for a counter coup the regime stood its ground but by then the rebels in the north had changed the political dynamics in Mali. In response, the military declared a government of national unity with Cheick Modibo Diarra as prime minister.

After surviving what one might call a minor lurching by hostile soldiers, President Touré managed to return on the political stage as an interim President and offered his formal approval of the national unity government. Sooner than later the prime minister was forced to resign, and was replaced by Django Sissoko, in December 2012, who remains in power today. Since then there have been some unrest including an alleged mutiny by the “Green Berets,” supporters of President Touré, which was preemptively put down in bloodshed by government troops. Even though the national unity government still stands, there are concerns and reservations by the international community about its legitimacy. This factor of instability radiates towards almost every dimension in the conflict in Mali, south or north. With pressure from the French and the US a general election is scheduled for July 2013 to establish a democratically elected government. It is questionable how successful these elections will be considering the ongoing war, yet it seems to be the best course of action at this point.

In addition to the outstanding work of the Malian diplomatic mission in Washington, DC, and the tireless global campaigning of the First Lady of

Mali, Mme Traoré, on behalf of the victims of the war, the national unity government has taken a very significant step by recently appointing - by presidential decree - the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 30 members of a Reconciliation and Dialogue Commission. This step was hailed by the African Union and it is the most promising development in regards to country-wide peace building in Mali. But the question of legitimacy still remains and without international pressure it is unlikely that it will be answered. Therefore initiatives such as truth and reconciliation dialogues, refugee and IDP protection and care, health services, emergency food and water supply, and reconstruction, should immediately receive a laser targeted, free of red tape, assistance from the United States and the rest of the world before the country deteriorates any further. Yet other sectors which would encourage the regime to hold on to power and deny elections should be held back. A strongly supported democratically elected government will be necessary for succeeding in any further peace negotiations.

**Sixth: The Malian government today lacks the political capital to take the necessary risks to peacefully end the MNLA rebellion.** It is accurate to state that the government and the MNLA are still practically at war. Even though the French have reluctantly called for the future disarmament of the insurgents, there is no guarantee that they will actually disarm as they have not committed yet to any disarmament treaty. The MNLA is facing the wrath of a traumatized society, especially of non Tuareg in the north, and of a government which does not yet carry the legitimacy nor the political capital to build peace with them effectively. Even stable governments have lost power and leaders have lost their lives, such as Israel's President Rabin, for offering what a potent minority considered too much. The path to peace is a treacherous one and it requires strong foundations from both sides to sit and negotiate a resolution. If the MNLA is to disarm and enter general elections as a party and then fall victim to a massacre similar to the Patriotic Union in Colombia in the late 80's then any hope for peace in the country within the next fifteen years will be lost.

The MNLA on the other hand does not seem anywhere close to becoming "political," and unless they receive guidance and put their politics together before the oncoming elections, a huge opportunity to end this one part of the conflict in Mali will be lost. Many claim that the MNLA does not represent the Tuareg people as a whole and therefore they should not be dealt with as a legitimate player. As true as that maybe, this in itself doesn't say much as historically, there has never been an armed movement for independence which at its conception has enjoyed an overwhelming support by the people whom it claimed to represent. Against popular belief the majority of the settlers in the Americas, the

Italians during Garibaldi and Mazzini, the Irish during the Easter Rising, the Palestinians at the beginning steps of the PLO; they all viewed these movements with suspicion or even dismay before entering the cause en masse, usually due to the misguided and brutal response of the ruling authorities in suppressing these revolts.

Most recently, in Kosovo, a case with very similar characteristics with northern Mali in regards to geopolitical aspects, the Kosovo Liberation Army, throughout the war, had been considered a villain by the majority of the Kosovar Albanians themselves who overwhelmingly had sided with Ibrahim Rugova who considered the KLA an obstacle to his non-violent resistance approach. And yet the KLA with its limited popularity brought Milosevic down and broke Kosovo away from Serbia gaining overwhelming popularity after Kosovo's independence.

**Seventh: There are no shortcuts or alternatives to dealing directly with the MNLA.** The creation of a new political party meant to represent the Tuareg people in Mali<sup>[8]</sup> who are against the armed struggle and the MNLA, resembles strongly Ibrahim Rugova's party agenda and it may not be enough in gathering the Tuareg around a new entity and away from the MNLA. There are more serious implications than just raising suspicion among many Tuareg of the north of some form of capitulation. Parties such as this i.e. Rugova in Kosovo, SDLP in N Ireland, the Nationalist Basque Party in Spain and others, have a dual effect on the conflict in regards to those armed groups they are supposed to marginalize. On one hand they provided a legitimate voice and a vehicle for representation of a population which had no such voice earlier. To some degree - for as long as the state avoids atrocities and retribution against their correspondent parts of the population - they may marginalize the armed groups but with the slightest misstep by the state military or security apparatus or provocateurs, these groups may provide a safe warm-up space for folks to join the armed groups immediately and en masse.

By marginalizing the militants, instead of bringing them and exposing them to the political process, the state actually preserves a distant but persistent alternative option for those who stand in between the option of violence and non-violence. Marginalizing rebel groups-to-turn-political deprives them of necessary intellectual and legalistic capacities to become a party. Therefore they remain "floating" via violence indefinitely and until they grow popular again. And they usually do return. State favorite parties are usually elite parties - the SDPL was nicknamed "The Schoolteachers, Doctors and Lawyers Party" by most Catholics during the Troubles. Political, social, and financial elites are disproportionately affected by discriminatory state policies and when the state fails to

address the grievances of the population, such elite parties grow more and more irrelevant, and the balance tips against towards violence.

Experience from Northern Ireland, Colombia, Nepal, and others dealing with MNLA-type of groups entailed on behalf of the state some very delicate handling of an explosive mix of risky infiltration, expensive and sometimes lethal counterinsurgency, precarious tolerance, suicidal persistence, brutal self-reflection and reform, and self destructively honest negotiations; and a well-defined process and variables to monitor progress. The moment of pause provided by the French intervention is the only shortcut one could ever hope for in regards to the MNLA. The simple fact that they still exist, logistically indicates that they have achieved at least a critical level of popular basis. And as desperate and defeated as they may seem, just as the KLA in Kosovo, they hold another strong card in their sleeves and they seem to know how to play it.

**Eighth: The territorial integrity of Mali may not be as important a priority to the west as is a stable regional buffer in the North against Al Qaida; which happens to almost overlap with the broader Tuareg regional distribution.** Even though the French' decision to collaborate with the MNLA created a wave of negative reactions<sup>[9]</sup> the reasons behind this decision is in this analysis the biggest challenge for Mali. One of the most comprehensive, but little noticed publication is Henry H. Perritt Jr's "*Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA): The Inside Story of an Insurgency.*" According to the author, one of the new elements in modern insurgency warfare, which the KLA introduced, had very little to do with warfare per se and much to do with their ability to exploit to their maximum benefit the fears and anxieties (the "pain") of the NATO coalition. Tired of fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), the West had no appetite for Milosevic's attempt to reassert his power in this historic for Serbia site. Once he attempted to brutally suppress the incipient ethnic Albanian majority community in Kosovo, what he actually achieved was to trigger nightmares in the West of the resurrection of the B&H war, and even worse, this time a potential spill of the new war outside the borders of the former Yugoslavia.

The KLA, fully aware of its geopolitical relevance of the time, designed an ingenious strategy which would limit the operational character of their insurgency only to the degree that Milosevic would continue his attacks on Kosovar ethnic Albanians raising the red flag for the NATO allies. Even though Perritt did not discover the term - it was coined years earlier to imply an indivisible mix of politics with war<sup>[10]</sup> - he is the first to apply the term on an insurgency case study. Kosovo in many ways resembles the situation that the MNLA is in today in Mali. The KLA exploited the fact that the NATO allies were more concerned with the

regional stability in the Balkans than with the territorial integrity of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For the French, the US and the West in general, the real threat in the region is not the MNLA but Al Qaeda and the AQIM in particular. The territorial integrity of Mali is important in principle but as Mali is represented by an unstable regime, the French' cynical decision of collaborating with the MNLA against opening a two-front war in a terrain as challenging as northern Mali was almost common sense. In fact the French left whole chunks of territory in the borders with Mauritania, and the combined borders with Algeria and Niger including whole cities, under the MNLA control to patrol against the Islamists and enforce the rule of law. Even if the MNLA had not arrived to the conclusion of following a KLA-style fourth generation warfare, circumstances have already imposed that strategy on them.

All that remains to complete the analogy with Kosovo is the government of Mali, or any other ethnically or politically defined force, attacking the Tuareg population in the north. It will be a perfect Kosovo scenario with the MNLA winning territory without having to scratch a nail. The only victory so far of the MNLA has been to show up in the north while no other available force was present, for one reason or another. They provided the French with guides and intelligence - having had a first-hand experience and knowledge of their former friends and now foes, the Islamists - and had guns which they knew how to use in the direction opposite to the French and the UN troops. They also offered to help the French locate French hostages snapped earlier by Al Qaeda.

So far, whenever the MNLA and Malian government troops rub noses, the results are devastating. Enough so to cause outrage in the international community, bringing the MNLA even closer to the French, and increasing sympathy for the Tuareg. But this is not the only or even the main source of power for the MNLA. Northern Mali is home to only 20% of Tuareg in the region. The rest is distributed, partially in Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, as far north as Libya. The Tuareg in northern Mali are an extension of a population which is distributed right at the core of the operational territory of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb which extends from Morocco to Mali and from Tunisia to Sudan. Strategically, harmonious relations with the Tuareg in that region are vital to the West, for intelligence and operational resources in fighting Al Qaeda. If the war between the Malian government and the MNLA spread as a broader regional tribal confrontation, then the West may find itself in danger of creating a new enemy, out of an ethnic group of critical strategic value, by investing on a unified Mali.

As of now, and considering certain peculiarities of these otherwise very friendly and rich in culture nomadic people, the West sees with suspicion

and condemnation a group which broadly practices slavery, human trafficking and weapons smuggling. Yet if it comes to the war against Al Qaida the West may choose the option of an independent north instead of fight the Tuareg to keep Mali united. The recent declaration of independence by the MNLA before they were hijacked by Islamist extremists was met more with indifference and curiosity by the international community than with outrage and strong condemnation. The MNLA is a classic fourth generation warfare insurgency and it will take more than a democratically elected government in Bamako to get around it. In case the war reignites then the French, the US and the rest of their allies, will have to choose either to stick with a unified Mali or to charge Mali a bitter price, Kosovo-style.

**Nineth: This is a case of a complex insurgency.** The similarities between Iraq and the current situation in Mali are tempting. The opportunistic strategy of the MNLA to join forces with the Islamists and Al Qaida against the government, resembles the Iraqi nationalist insurgencies against the American occupation, joining forces with characters such as Al Zarqawi and the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI); at which point counterinsurgency and counterterrorism became almost impossible to distinguish, before even the Iraqi civil war broke. But then all similarities end and not necessarily for the better. The government is not an American transitional “Provisional Authority” with a “Malian Government Council” not even of the Al-Yawar Interim Government breed. With the exception of President Touré and the Malian nation as a people, relations of the US with the national unity government in Mali, to say the least, are from simply polite to one of marginal toleration.

The US is anxious to see them removed via elections for just as the French, they are forced to consider alliances and depend on less tasteful alternatives in fighting Al Qaida. Just as in Iraq and Afghanistan, what characterizes the environment of conflict in Mali the most is the degree of complexity of its insurgency situation. The French managed to somehow, temporarily at least, de-conflict the system by collaborating with the MNLA and in doing so, keeping them away from the option of creating any further alliances with the Islamic extremists. But this is only a break and following the French withdrawal, in the case of a weak and aggressive towards the MNLA Malian government, the system is more likely than less to explode back to its initial level of complexity or even worse.

If the system becomes even more complicated then it will require a similarly complex counterinsurgency and counterterrorism approach by the Malian military and society. Even though the French demonstrated in Mali that they are a formidable force in the counterinsurgency arena in

one of the most hostile environs on the planet, they have yet to practice in real time counterinsurgency and counterterrorism *and* nation building at the same time. In fact even the US took almost a decade to make sense of a reliable process and it is still questionable whether it ever worked in Afghanistan.

Now that the French withdraw, the task falls on the UN peacekeepers a fragmented and compartmentalized force, untrained to the challenge, and with limited mandate and logistics to pull what the US and its allies marginally accomplished in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, considering counterinsurgency 101 and the principle of half-life... it is only a matter of time before the population in the north begins to view and react with the UN peacekeepers even as an occupation force. The President of Chad Idriss Deby wiselt stated that "the Chadian army does not have the skills to fight a shadowy, guerrilla-style war that is taking place in northern Mali," to justify the withdrawal of his troops from Mali.[11]

**Tenth: Complex insurgencies require complex intelligence gathering and a process which combines operational with strategic civic action in real time.** Part of this process includes adequate detention and interrogation facilities and methods which are designed to help detainees find their way back into society as constructive elements or even in favor of the peace building effort. To begin with, detainees are to be identified with the particular layer of the insurgency that they affiliate themselves with - Al Qaida, Ansar Dine, MNLF - before channel them towards becoming part of the solution instead of the problem. Torture, deplorable detention conditions, and overwhelming intimidation work against this particular design. The operational aspects of this war are highly demanding in logistics and require high levels of professionalism and experience as well as expensive equipment extending from human intelligence all the way to space technology. The current government of Mali has already been criticized for violating human rights including having caused deaths of detainees by torture and mistreatment.[12]

The Abu Ghraib scandal, the worst setback of the US against insurgencies in the US, was a wake up call for replacing the traditional "capture and hold indefinitely" pattern with a highly sophisticated process of dealing with detainees as part of a real-time counterinsurgency situation; Given the resources available and the lack of know-how and expertise at almost every level required, as described earlier, it is not a surprise that the situation is as bad as it is today in Mali. Without an effective system of complex intelligence gathering and processing, identifying counterterrorism from counterinsurgency elements, and following tactics and policy accordingly, in a real time cycle, it is very likely for Mali's war fronts to worsen, either it is with the

MNLA, the Ansar Dine, the Islamic Movement of Azawad, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Sharia, and who knows later even with Boko Haram.

Combining and coordinating these operations with clearly peace building activities from the civic society side - which remains strong in Mali - will be a very hard path for the Malian government to walk alone. It will be more so as the war against some of those groups turns chronic. The most effective response to the situation in Mali is highly costly and requires resources that neither Mali, nor the UN, nor even the French can afford to provide for this war. For the US to invest in establishing such network it will take more than the usual military assistance to Mali, it will take high levels of cooperation at close partnership. Transferring and adjusting a counterinsurgency / counterterrorism / peace building network on any given geopolitical terrain is not as simple as plug and play.

**Eleventh: Al Qaeda is anxious to reaching the Atlantic.** What makes Al Qaida so tenacious in its fight in Mali is that they are on a race to reach the Atlantic Ocean, an aspiration they've been working on for almost a decade in coordination with many extremist groups as far as those in Nigeria. Thus far the Republic of Mali has been, and currently remains, one the West's strongest allies in the war against Al Qaida.

Even as Ansar Dine was trying to consolidate power in the north, Al Qaida was working with Boko Haram in creating a bridge - using Mali as a junction between North Africa and Nigeria - before the French troops arrived. So far Al Qaeda in Africa has been predominately driven and staffed by Arab volunteers, their presence being considered exotic by most Africans south of the Maghreb. A stable zone of operations and supply route with Boko Haram and other purely African groups would precede the birth of a continental African Al Qaida, an important strategic gain, and a potential game changer. This junction is closed for the time being but it will take more than peacekeepers and a few more thousand lightly trained Malian troops to keep it this way for long.

### **The best case scenario:**

The UN peacekeepers arrive in Mali en masse and avoid interfering with the local population. The government in Mali opens space to the MNLA to safely disarm and if they wish, to form a political party which runs in the oncoming general elections in July with another name of course and a milder agenda for devolution. A wave of inter-communal and inter-tribal Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and dialogue overtakes the country, healing the hearts and fostering collaboration. A huge



reconstruction and refugee and IDP rehabilitation aid arrives and is directed immediately and spent where it matters: restoring homes, schools, hospitals, institutions, and the local police. At the same time the country remains vigilant in guarding the new peace and against any further infiltration from Al Qaida or its derivatives. Occasional bombings and chronic lethal disruption are dealt with, without panic and in bringing the community even closer together. A democratically elected strong government in Mali under the inspiring leadership of its President and First Lady bring the nation together in turning the tide against foreign militant groups through military and civic resources including culture, development and education.

Arrested insurgents are treated as political prisoners and the groups they represent are fought against but at the same time are encouraged to transform into political entities and decommission their arms. Arrested terrorists from groups using Mali as a base for broader agendas at the expense of the Malian people are processed as valuable intelligence sources and encouraged to participate in transformation and reintegration programs without the use of torture and humiliation with their groups losing hold of the country gradually until through further regional cooperation with its neighbors, Mali departs towards days of tranquility and peace again. Refugees and IDPs return home and victims of war find their way to physical and psychological healing in a new country which now focuses intensely on local grievances, fostering development, fighting drought, erosion and desertification, reforming land policies, and providing jobs.

### **The worst case scenario:**

With so many fuses close to the gunpowder it is not hard to construct. The UN peacekeepers enter Mali and grow restless by frequent attacks by Al Qaida. They turn on the population which they torment including practicing smuggling, rape and corruption. The MNLA exploits the new situation and reasserts the Tuareg vision for independence, this time avoiding the mistakes of the past, by isolating the Islamists and gaining international support. The Malian government responds with vengeance and with overwhelming force with numbers of refugees and IDPs skyrocketing. Many of the refugees lose the Tuareg sense of unity and brotherhood and the conflict spreads over with columns of MNLA fighters streaming from Algeria, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Al Qaida uses the opportunity to return and establishes strongholds in rural and urban centers to ignite tribal strife by horrifying the population with spectacular and lethal bombings Al Zarqawi style. They bite the bet and Mali, or whatever is left of it falls into chaos. UN peacekeepers and

everyone else withdraws as they seal the borders of Mali so that they protect maintain their strategic interests from outside and to avoid a spillover. No aid, no food, nothing can reach the country. It is a hellish scenario.

### **A scenario in-between:**

Most likely none of the two scenarios will materialize but chunks and pieces in between. Yet even so, Mali will still have to deal effectively with a complex insurgency outside its league. It will have to take enormous risks in ending the MNLA rebellion peacefully and sustainably, a feat which countries with very stable governments like the UK had hard time achieving. The population will live under a continuous, chronic barrage of bombings by an increasingly aggressive Al Qaida intended to divide the people and ethnic groups and turn them against each other. Many will leave, and those who reside in camps in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania will be stuck for decades most without the protection of the international community. They will seek refuge to further destinations carrying grievances searching for answers and ways to respond; challenging regional security.

The elected government in Mali might or might not survive or it might. Best case scenario the President and the First Lady will share with the rest of Malians their narrative of survival, acting like iconic figures, taking even further risks of their own to bring the people together. Even so they will now have to face an even more powerful politically ambitious Malian military with training from abroad and equipped with lethal ammunition and capabilities. Will they listen to the lessons, good and bad, learned from Kosovo, Colombia, Northern Ireland, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Israel, Spain, South Africa... or the lessons from Iraq, and Afghanistan, and even so will they be able to deal with such a high-complexity insurgency environment? Will they de-conflict and separate or will they deal with everything in the same way?

### **Questions We Should Ask:**

Mali is a country of many narratives, told in many languages for centuries now. One can only have faith to people with such humility and tolerance for the other, tested again and again over the ages. But as the French withdraw and the people are left again on their own devices, to deal with complex and fourth generation exotic insurgencies, half a million refugees and IDPs, a demolished infrastructure, and the threat of Al Qaida looming literally over their shoulders... one cannot help but ask... Shouldn't we in the West begin to approach this situation differently than we did in previous cases? Shouldn't we use all of our

powers to help establish a strong unifying government through clean and fair elections with contestants that are well prepared and have full and free access to the people? Shouldn't we assist the government and the people from the Tuareg constituencies and also the MNLA in finding their way forward and towards a more permanent arrangement no matter how costly no matter how difficult? Water, electricity, governance and policing, sanitation, health and other public services, paired with a fair parliamentary representation might be more than enough to restore their Tuareg pride and find them again a real home in mighty Mali.

And finally... can we afford the risk of Mali falling into a complete chaos? Of Al Qaida reaching out so close to the Atlantic, so close to Nigeria, so close to mutating into a continental African terrorist force? And considering the high stakes involved, and the work and resources needed to avoid all that... as we witness the situation there as distant observers... we should ask ourselves before it is too late... are we expecting far too much from Mali? Are we doing everything possible to help?

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